

EVEN PATCHOULI GETS THE BLUES

By Gina Flores

In the novel *Perfume*, by Patrick Susskind, there is a quote that I find both intriguing and alarming because it at once reminds me of the power of our olfactory sense and the potential for its use and abuse:

“Scent is the relative of breath. Together with breath it enters human beings, who cannot defend themselves against it, not if they want to live. And scent enters into one's very core, goes directly to the heart and decides for good and all between affection and contempt, disgust and lust, love and hate. He who rules scent rules the hearts of men”.(1)

We wear scent to beguile, bewitch, attract and even repel. We wear scent to reflect our many moods. And more profoundly we use scent to create “persona”, to declare who we are or wish to be, to establish rank and class, and for myself, as a method for recognizing “tribe.” How many times have I been at some function or passed someone on the street and ah....., that moment of knowing, that I can understand that person somehow before we even speak. I confess, I belong to “tribe patchouli”..... and that I am one of those devotees who will still follow someone for several blocks in order to acquire the name of the precious brand a fellow devotee might be wearing. We are an interesting lot this “tribe patchouli”new agers, ageing hippies, ex-hippies, leftist extremist, right wing neo-cons in moderate clothing, gen-x's, grunge music Bonaroo attenders, topless Cannes beach goers, artsy Parisiennes,.....the list goes on and on. But in my estimation, there is a common thread that unites my “tribe” and that is our dedication to the exotic, the unknown, and the possibility of the existence of beauty in contradiction. Patchouli, my dear dear Patchouli, is that contradiction.

Patchouli, even your looks are deceiving, the first of its contradictions. If we were somewhere in Indonesia, taking a stroll let's say, we might come upon a small bushy plant that has mint-like serrated leaves and small white flowers. Oh mint! you might exclaim, but alas this interloper is none other than patchouli, whose name is taken from the Tamil “patchei” meaning green and “elei” meaning leaf. (2) Chamber's Encyclopaedia: A Dictionary of Universal Knowledge, Vol.7, 1891, goes on and describes our Labiatae family member as “a low shrub 2 ½ or 3 feet high. A native of Silhet, the Malay coast, Ceylon, Java, the neighborhood of Bombay and probably also China; but owing to the fondness of Asiatics for the perfume it yields, it is difficult to say where it is native or where it is cultivated. Every part of the plant is odoriferous, but the younger portions of the branches with the younger leaves are chosen. The odour is very powerful and to many extremely disagreeable.”

Patchouli, whose scent became associated with India during the Raj, actually originated in the Philippine Islands and Indonesia, where most commercial oil is still produced. The plant is also cultivated in Sumatra, Malaya, the Seychelles, Madagascar, the Chinese coast, and, on a limited basis, in Japan. (3)

Our small bushy perennial, with its unique scent has blooming flowers from mid-autumn to early winter. Pogostemon cablin has a hairy stem, and Pogostemon heyneanus, or Java patchouli, a smooth stem. P.heyneanus is considered to have an inferior scent and is used as a cheaper adulterant oil to “true” patchouli (Pogostemon cablin). After the young patchouli plants have been harvested, the leaves are partially dried, stacked and baled. Then the leaves can be fermented slightly in order to maximize the yield by weakening the cell walls that hold the essential oil, which is extracted by steam distilling the plant leaves. (4)

The aroma of patchouli essential oil is definitely an acquired taste, (think truffles and foie gras) and is well worth exploring and, here it is contradiction #2, it improves with time. Unlike some essential oils that oxidize easily and diminish in therapeutic value and aromatic quality, with time my dear patchouli improves, like a fine wine. Why my Aromatherapy Certification Program Instructor, Andrea Butje, has an exquisite vintage patchouli oil that she has had for at least “15 years” and I covet it !!! It is soft, smooth, warm, earthy and beautiful - nothing like the sharp, raw, pungent, aroma of inferior quality oil used in many adulterated, cheap perfume oils and incense.(4) Despite patchouli’s ability to age gracefully, some noses (a perfume industry name for people with an amazing ability to smell and therefore create perfume) are not seduced by its aroma. Molecules called terpenes are partially responsible for the dry, medicinal effects in patchouli that turn noses off. Terpenes have a resinous solvent like odor that resembles turpentine. This, along with poor quality oils that smell musty and barn-like, are what cause “non-lovers” to associate repulsive and dirty attributes to this essential oil. (6) To rescue it’s reputation, patchouli has a high output of essential oil, up to 3.5%, as compared to rose oil which yields less than 1%.(4) Now one might erroneously think that a beautiful flower like the rose might produce a hefty amount of essential oil..... but once again my dear patchouli is a shining star, even when it comes to essential oil yield. Oh, but if patchouli by any other name could smell so sweet ! And in research it has also been found that “patchouli had similar calming effects to rose” (5) Wow, the battle of the essential oils is heating up!

So how do we come to know, and love, our clever little patchouli. Well, we can blame fashion, both as an industry and a symbol of status. The aroma of patchouli became known both in Britain and France around the 1820's, as patchouli was used to impregnate shawls from India, since insects, and particularly moths, are adverse to it. These shawls were all the rage, and hence, the local weavers attempted to copy the designs so they could get a piece of the export action (to other parts of the world) of this fashion craze. And copy them they did, and quite well it is said, however there was one annoying problem, they were not scented with patchouli, and therefore they were unable to sell them. Because everyone, that was anyone, knew genuine shawls from India had the aroma of patchouli! And here is contradiction #3, one little mint-like looking plant, that smells nothing like one would assume it should, dictated the export of European shawls just because the “fashionable people” required their shawls smell like patchouli! C’est incroyable mais vrai! (that’s incredible!). But leave it to the French, they soon discovered “le secret”, and began importing patchouli for the very same use. (2,3)

And as we all know, fashions come and fashions go. Eventually those desirable shawls, impregnated with the aroma of patchouli fell out of fashion with the rich and into the “wardrobes” of prostitutes, and hence it’s connection with things carnal and forbidden. Revered and adored when emanated by the

rich.....forbidden and abhorred when worn by whores, interesting when we remember that patchouli's initial use was as an insect repellent for those luxury goods.(6)

In 19th century France, before patchouli fell out of favor with the "rich and famous", everybody wore patchouli. There are numerous references in novels of that era, as in Balzac, Hugo, Flaubert, Zola and others. It was often dabbed not on the skin, but on handkerchiefs. One notable reference is Emma in Madame Bovary who scents her kerchiefs with patchouli to further seduce her lover.(7)

In my research of my beloved "patchou", I came across a bizarre but fascinating reference in Current Opinion, Vol. 5, July-Dec 1890, and the description of the use of patchouli follows:

"Small scented sachets are worn about the person concealed about the bodice, and small sachets are sewn about the hem of the short petticoat emitting a delightful odour with every movement of the wearer. The clever Parisiennes, however, are said to have gone a step farther, and fairly exhale perfume, for they impregnate their bodies, their flesh and blood with whatever pleasing odour the most affect. A woman addicted to the use of morphine in hypodermic injections, discovered that after an unusually heavy dose her body exhaled to a very perceptible degree the characteristic odour of the drug. In an idle moment one day she charged her needle with a few drops of patchouli, and soon observed the same result, even her linen becoming as strongly scented with patchouli as if the essence had been sprinkled upon it. The fact that hypodermic injections of perfume might be used with such pleasing results of course did not remain a secret long. Soon the needle syringe became as indispensable to a toilet outfit as a manicure set ! " (8)

Quelle horreur !!! (What a horror).....imagine injecting essential oil into yourself as a means of "beautification". Well luckily with dear patchouli, if these "idle moment" women rubbed a little bit of patchouli on their skin at the injection site it then afforded them a bit of skin healing, scar prevention, and antibacterial protection too !

In the book A Brief History of the Smile, by Angus Trumble, he informs us that by the 18th century the French consumed approximately 2 million pots of rouge each year for use on both cheeks and lips. In addition, comparable amounts of rose and patchouli scent were consumed by women of rank !

The battle of rose vs. patchouli continues, part two !

Because of its popularity, patchouli came to take on a few meanings. If someone said, "cela sent le patchouli" (that smells of patchouli), it could mean either (a) oh wow, you smell like that exotic, fabulous, earthy smell I know, love and desire or (b) you smell of cheap, strong perfume that is really offensive to me ! So even the word "patchouli" took on contradictory meanings. (7)

Despite its trials and tribulations, patchouli is not dead, au contraire! Many perfume lines, both high-brow and low-brow offer their own renditions, one fairly recent example is Tom Ford's "White Patchouli"..... very high-brow I might add. Patchouli is actually very important to the perfume industry, because it is what is known as a fixative. This means that it supports other fragrance notes in a

perfume and harmoniously anchors them. (6) Hmmmmmm, sounds like the emotional grounding and balancing that my dear little patchou offers us, is precisely what it does for the perfume industry.

And now that we are talking about grounding and balancing, let's look at some of the other uses of patchouli.

In aromatherapy patchouli is considered a great balancer, relaxing yet stimulating, particularly relevant for conditions of weak immunity where overwork and anxiety have left the individual in a susceptible state. It may also relieve the strain of those with excessive mental activity who may feel "out of touch" with their body. Patchouli is said to bring three principal forces to work harmoniously within the body, the creative at the navel, the heart center and the transcendental at the crown. (10)

Patchouli is also thought to be the bringer of prosperity and abundance. The Hare Krishna believe that god Krishna himself inhabits patchouli. In Arabic cultures it is believed to be helpful in preventing the spread of disease and prolonging life. In Voodoo it is used to bring peace of mind and harmony into the home; legend says that if it is used to place a hex on someone, that hex will boomerang onto the sender. Patchouli assists in our connection with the planet and the past vibrational patterns that we may encounter upon our journey. And Wiccans believe you should burn patchouli to invite positive web witching energies. (10,11,12).

Patchouli's has many therapeutic uses as well, in India it is used in medicine for its anti-inflammatory, antibacterial, antifungal and antiseptic properties. One Indian study compared patchouli's effectiveness against 22 strains of bacteria and 12 fungal strains. It was found that patchouli oil inhibited the growth of 20 of the bacterial strains and all of the fungi. In another study, patchouli was shown not only to be one of the strong antibacterials and antifungals amongst essential oils but that it was the ONLY essential oil to meet the criteria of being an effective antifungal without affecting the commensal bacteria. (4,5)

Our little friend patchouli is also useful for skin conditions such as acne, dermatitis, eczema, dry and cracked skin, and dandruff. It has been used in the east for ages for numerous ailments including colds, headaches, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, diarrhea, tumors and bad breath. In Chinese medicine, the dried leaves and stems have long been used to inspire clarity and balance the chi. (4)

I began this dissertation confessing that I am one of those "patchouli wearing weirdos" willing against all odds to defend my small, mint-like looking, much maligned friend, and in my own personal journey, in the attempt to defend "with honor" my dear patchou, I have fallen madly in love all over again ! And this may be the last of the contradictions, loving something so much to only find out it is absolutely possible to find new reasons to love it even more !

I leave you, the reader, with this last quote from the novel *Guenevere, Queen of the Summer Country*, by Rosalind Miles, "It was patchouli, the sweet seductive scent from Byzantium that her mother had favored, and that she to loved so much....."

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